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*Semiotics as a Theory of Representation*

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*Abstract:* Much of semantic theory is based on the mistake of supposing that the primary units of meaning are individual expressions such as words, symbols, and signs. On the contrary, the proper units of analysis have to be whole sentences or propositions. The individual word only functions as it contributes to the meaning of the sentence (it may be a one word sentence), because only the sentence can give us truth conditions or other conditions of satisfaction. This is an old point in semantic theory, but its implications are not always properly understood, and the aim of this paper is to explore some of those implications.

*Keywords:* Speech acts; Drawings; Semiotics; Proposition; Semantic phenomena.

The official topic of this special issue concerns drawing. I will not have much to say about drawing, but I will make a few remarks at the beginning. Drawing is a special case of the more general phenomenon of visual representation, picturing. How many sorts of speech acts can we perform with pictures? The possibilities of actual drawing are much more limited than pictures in general because few people are good enough at drawing. The sorts of pictures that we use to communicate go far beyond drawings. When I show my passport with my picture I communicate important facts about my identity, but I could do nothing like that by drawing.

We can think of the basic structure of the speech act as a propositional content presented with a certain illocutionary force, a structure I usually represent as  $F(p)$ . Some speech acts have an even simpler structure where you simply have  $F(n)$  where the content is not a whole proposition but just a reference to an object. If I say "The 49ers won", that is an assertion with the propositional content that the 49ers won. It has the form  $F(p)$ . If I say "Hurrah, for the 49ers!" that has the structure  $F(n)$  where I simply refer to the object and perform the expressive speech act "Hurrah!". Obviously, the structure with the whole propositional content is much more powerful as it allows for an infinite number of different propositions.

How much of this could we do with drawing? Not much, because drawing, to be successful, normally requires some physical resemblance between the picture

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and the thing depicted. I realize this is an extremely complex topic and there are all sorts of drawings that use much more than resemblance, and pictorial resemblance itself is an extremely complex notion. All the same, resemblance is of the very essence of pictorial representation, so the other forms in one way or another involve resemblance. Think of a picture of the crucifix. The symbolism here is extremely heavy and has 2000 years of history. All the same, we typically identify the pictured cross as a crucifix because it looks like one.

Of our five possible types of speech acts, Assertives, Directives, Commissive, Expressives and Declaratives, how many can be done pictorially? I think all five, though Declaratives require some special additions. Let's go through the list. If I draw you a map of the streets by my house, this is an Assertive because it's supposed to represent how things are. If I draw a line on the map to show you how you're supposed to get to the supermarket, it now becomes a Directive because it's an instruction as to what you are supposed to do. If I draw a map with a line showing how I am committed to going to the market, it becomes a Commissive, a type of promise. If I draw a contemptuous picture of Donald Trump, it becomes an Expressive because I am expressing contempt and hostility. How about Declaratives? Can we make something the case by drawing it as being the case, a Declaration? Here is an example: Imagine two tribes using a beach. They agree that one group are the North-enders and the other are the South-enders. They cannot agree on the dividing line in the middle. To settle the issue, they appoint a neutral judge to draw a line on a map of the beach which marks the divide. Drawing the line constitutes a Declaration because it makes something the case by representing it as being the case.

The study of semiotics has now passed into the academic mainstream so that it no longer arouses any puzzle that there should be such courses and, perhaps even, departments of semiotics. This raises an interesting question: What exactly is semiotics and how does it differ from other studies of language and communication?

I once asked Thomas Sebeok, "What exactly is semiotics?" He said, "It is what you do." I felt a bit like the famous Monsieur Jourdain who discovered that, all along, he had been speaking prose without knowing it. I, without knowing it, had been speaking semiotics. I doubt that this is true, except in a very broad sense in which anybody who studies language is studying semiotics. If you look at more narrow definitions which seem more enlightening, semiotics is the science of *signs*. The word "signs" here figures essentially but is used somewhat loosely because, of course, many of the phenomena studied under the name "semiotics" are not literally signs. If I have a sign on my wall that says, "No Smoking", that is literally a sign. Signs like that are all over. They indicate speed limits, boundaries of territories, and all sorts of other things. The way I comb my hair or the way I wear my shirt are not in that sense signs, but they are definitely within the purview of semiotics. Signs, so construed, would include all of Peirce's distinction of icon, index, and symbol, which for him were all three different kinds of signs. On this conception of semiotics, words are one kind of sign among many others. The others have a bewildering variety including not just clothing, but food, styles of eating, and all sorts of other styles of behavior.

Even broadening the definition of sign to include things that are not literally signs, there is still an ambiguity because, in one sense, “sign” refers to an object that, by human intention, refers to something beyond itself. These are the signs we have been talking about so far. However, there are other things that are simply indicators and these have no connection with intentionality. For example, spots on a person’s face can be a sign of measles and a high fever can be a sign of the influenza virus. I take it that neither of these are signs in the semiotic sense because they do not involve human intentionality.

Is there a well-defined notion of semiotics as something in addition to the standard conceptions in the philosophy of language? My hesitant and somewhat tentative conclusion is, no. I think that semiotics as a separate discipline rests on a mistake. It rests on the mistake of thinking that the individual expression, or other device, is the proper unit for the analysis of semantic phenomena. I use expressions like “semantic phenomena” precisely for their vagueness that renders them almost useless. Later on, I will say more about this, but as a preliminary formulation, I could say the following: Semiotics is based on the mistake of supposing that the primary meaningful units in analysis of semantic phenomena are words, symbols, and signs of various kinds. I want to say that that is never the case. The proper unit of meaning for a semantic analysis is the entire sentence or proposition. This is a point that Frege made, even though the reasons he gave for it were inadequate. I will come back to Frege’s conception later. In language proper, the word is never the unit of meaning. The word only functions as part of the sentence (it may of course be a one-word sentence). The basic unit of meaning is not the word, it is the entire sentence or other larger unit. Why? Only the larger unit can give us the representational content that gives us truth conditions or other conditions of satisfaction. Language functions to represent, in various ways, states of affairs in the world, states of affairs that exist, states of affairs that we lament, states of affairs that we are ordered to bring about, states of affairs that we have promised to create, etc. That is, what we are getting at is how human semantic phenomena, whether linguistic or otherwise, represent states of affairs. To do that in language, you have to have an entire sentence. The single word never does it.

I said earlier that the unit of meaning is not the word, but the entire sentence. However, of course, that might seem, on the face of it, obviously false. After all, we are taught the meanings of words. When we are learning other languages, we typically learn the meanings of words. For example, when learning French, we learn that “rouge” means “red.” Surely, one might say, it is the word which is the unit of meaning.

Another way to understand what I am driving at is to say that it is the mistake of semiotics to assimilate language to other sign systems, such as food and clothing. But language is radically different from these other systems because language functions primarily to represent states of affairs and these other things do not.

The essence of language is indicated by the fact that in uttering expressions of a language, speakers *intentionally commit themselves* to entire states of affairs in one or more of the possible illocutionary modes. Except for very artificial creations, there is nothing like this in other areas of semiotics.

When I lived in Oxford, both as a student and as a Don, the semiotics of clothing was very much obvious and was apparent to anyone who had to deal on a daily basis with students, faculty, and other people who lived in Oxford. You could tell immediately what the social class of a person was by his/her pattern of dress. It was easier with males, so I will concentrate on them. The standard uniform of Oxford males was grey flannel trousers, a tweed jacket, and a shirt – usually white – together with a tie – often a college tie or other club tie – and typically a sweater or waist coat, because the indoor climate was so cold that you had to have a lot of clothing on in order to keep warm. A simple glance at a person told you his class position. Working class people did not wear this sort of clothing and were easily recognizable as working class because they did not dress in a middle or upper class style. Clothing such as this was a *sign* of a person's class status in the obvious sense that you could infer the class status from the clothing. More explicit forms of clothing were the college ties. If you were from Christ Church, as I was, there were a few ties that were distinctively college ties which only could be interpreted as that the wearer was a member of Christ Church. Now, when I wear such a tie and wear it deliberately, is it a case of making the assertion, "I am a member of Christ Church"? I do not think so. The reason is that, if I deliberately wear a Balliol tie, and I wear it with the intention to deceive, nonetheless I am not yet lying. If somebody asks me point blank, "Are you a member of Balliol?" and I say, "Yes," that is a point blank lie. If I put on a Balliol tie and walk down the street, I am deceiving and I may even intend to deceive, but I am not yet lying. Now, this is essential to language because in language you cannot only promise, but because you can promise, you can also lie; and other forms of semiotics are importantly not like this. In order that a speaker can lie, the speaker must be able to make an explicit commitment to the truth of a proposition. Just wearing a necktie by itself does not do that.

The famous Saussurean claim that language is a system of differences has to be understood quite precisely, otherwise it says something false. Consider the difference between "pin" and "bin". Each means something entirely different from the other. A pin, which is a piece of metal that is capable of sticking things with, is quite unlike a bin, which is a large container. The difference in meaning between these two words is conveyed by the difference between the "p" and the "b". So it is tempting to conclude, and typically interpretations of Saussure have concluded, that language should not be thought of as a system of meanings, but as a system of *differences* and what we think of as the meanings is, somehow or other, the play or the action of these difference. Meaning is entirely a matter of differences. I think this is a very deep mistake and I now want to expose it fully. It is clear that language only functions if differences in semantic content can be conveyed by differences in syntactic form. Imagine a language that has a thousand different meanings but only one word. You cannot say anything in that language because you cannot distinguish one meaning from another. So there have to be differences in the syntactic forms of the language in order that it is useable for communication at all. But it is a fallacy to conclude from this that language just is a system of differences because, going back to our example, it is only because the word "bin" has the meaning that it does, namely a large container, and "pin" has the meaning it does, namely a

sharp pointed device suitable for poking something with, that these meanings are conveyed by the words “bin” and “pin”. Those two words might have been used to convey two completely different meanings. However, and this is the essential point, the meanings conveyed are not a matter of differences. Of course, there has to be a difference between pins and needles, and spikes and chisels, and there has to be a difference between bins, boxes, and jars, but all the same, there is a quite distinct content, *semantic content*, that is, *meaning*, conveyed by “bin” and “pin”. The point is that in order for this content to be communicable, there have to be distinctive syntactic markers in the words that differ from other distinctive markers in other words. That point is quite independent of the fact that the meanings themselves are not matters of syntactic differences.

The correct account is to say that “bin” and “pin” both convey semantic content. That semantic content is not itself a matter of syntactic differences, though of course, one semantic content has to differ from other semantic contents if language is to be used as a device for communication at all. The point however is that differences in semantic content have to be conveyed by differences in syntactical form. However, the fact that the differences in syntactical form convey the semantic content should not give us the illusion that semantic content is just a matter of “the play of differences”. It is not. There is quite distinct semantic content between “bin” and “pin”, and this is conveyed by the differences between the two syntactical expressions. But the syntactic differences convey something distinct because each expresses a different semantic content.

One of the distinguishing questions to pose to any system of representation is to ask: What do human beings have to have in order to use this? I want to say that, for the purposes of semiotics, signs are quite different from sentences. If you have sentences, and in particular, you have a generative capacity to generate new sentences using finite vocabulary, even if you cannot generate an infinite number of sentences, you still already have a very powerful apparatus. You can represent different states of affairs, including states of affairs not previously represented, and you can achieve different illocutionary points. For example, you can have a difference between telling somebody that something is the case and ordering to make something the case. In both cases, you have a propositional content and an illocutionary mode. If you just have an inventory of signs, it is not clear to me what you can do with it. Suppose you had an inventory of signs. You have signs of dress and signs conveyed by different types of food, but it is hard to see what the case is. I think this illustrates Frege’s point, that the key notion in semiotics is not the notion of a word, symbol, or sign, it is the notion of a *Satz*, a sentence, only a sentence can express a whole proposition. Our basic biological way of relating to reality, though this is disguised from us, is by way of entire propositional contents.

In this section, I want to argue that the sentential mode of representation is vastly more powerful than the semiotic mode. To make that more fully explicit, I want to argue that sentences are more powerful modes of representation than signs and symbols. Indeed, I want to argue less conclusively that in fact the semiotic mode presupposes the sentential mode. You cannot have such famous symbols as the crucifix, the hammer and sickle, and the swastika without having language, without sentences.

Let me explain this. In the case of sentences, you get two remarkable capacities: compositionality and generativity. Compositionality enables you to make new sentences, sentences you have not seen or heard before, out of a preexisting vocabulary. Generativity allows you to generate an infinite number of sentences. I think generativity is vastly important, but I do not think it is important for this particular discussion. I think what matters for this discussion is, that given a finite list of words and symbols, the meanings of which are known to the speakers and hearers of the language, you can produce and understand completely new thoughts, thoughts you have never heard before. So, if you have “the horse ran around the barn” and “John ate the cake”, that also allows you to form sentences like “John ate the horse” or “the cake ran around the barn”. These may or may not be meaningful, but the point is, they are certainly comprehensible. There is nothing in the formation rules that forbid their formulation and comprehension. In the case of the semiotic mode, the symbols are often immensely powerful. Think of the Christian crucifix, the Communist hammer and sickle, and the Nazi swastika. These have been immensely powerful. How exactly do they work? I do not think that that is an easy question to answer. One way to answer is to say that they stand for, or symbolize, a whole mode of life, a whole philosophy and a whole set of values. Now what does that mean, “stand for” or “symbolize”? I am not sure that we can give an adequate explanation of that, but I can say simply this: the person that understands the crucifix, the hammer and sickle, or the swastika understands that the person who endorses it, the person who wears a swastika on their arm band, who wears the crucifix around their neck, or puts the hammer and sickle on a flag that they fly over their building, is accepting membership in a community with a certain, rather specific, set of values and objectives. We need not go through all the details of what it means to be a Christian, a Communist, or a Nazi, but it is clear that for members of these particular movements, it has a great deal of meaning. Although meaning spills over in the sense that there are no precise boundaries to what it means to be a Christian, a Communist, or a Nazi. All the same, there has to be a core, and this core is symbolized by the crucifix, the hammer and sickle, or a swastika. So if we are asked what “symbolize” means, it means at least this: Someone who accepts the symbol in its full meaning is committed to a certain set of values and using the symbol is an expression of their commitment to this set of values.

Such symbols are immensely powerful and, in mere sentences, there is nothing quite like it. The closest one might get would be prayers. In the case of the Nicene Creed, “We believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only Son of God ...”. Anyone who recites the prayer is expressing explicitly the same set of values. I hope that it is obvious that the sentential forms allow for a vastly greater expressive power. You can say more things about more subjects than you can with symbolic forms. But, just as importantly, I think you can only understand the symbolic forms if you understand the sentential forms. You can only understand what it is to use the Nazi symbol or the Crucifix if you have sentences for explaining what it means

that the Nazi party is in power, that Christ died for our sins, or any number of other things. There are two marks of difference that I want to emphasize. First, the sentential has much greater expressive power. Secondly, the efficacy of the semiotic form presupposes the existence of the sentential.

### More on Saussure

On the standard interpretation, Saussure is supposed to have shown that language is a system of differences and that a proper study of language is an analysis of these differences. What exactly is that thesis and how important is it? In what follows, I am not interested in giving a scholarly account of Saussure's account of general linguistics, but rather, I will consider the version of it that has passed into the intellectual culture. I am not sure it is right, but it has certainly been influential and it is what I will be considering. If you think of words that differ sharply in meaning but rather marginally in their phonology, you will see an illustration of the point. Think of the difference between "bin" and "pin", or "high" and "sigh". It is clear in each case that the meanings of the two members of the pair are radically different. They are not in the least bit alike, but the only difference in the expression in both cases is a single consonant. Now, how should we analyze this phenomenon? Well, we cannot say that the difference in meaning is the difference between the "b" and the "p" because the "b" and the "p" have no separate meaning. Yet, there is a distinct meaning of the words. The correct account, according to the Saussurean tradition (again, I am not sure if Saussure would have accepted this), is that it is not "b" and "p", but rather the *difference* between "b" and "p". Indeed, if we think of language, that is exactly what languages are, systems of differences. So, if you claim that you had a language that had a thousand words with a thousand different meanings, but they were all the same word, then such a language could not function. There have to be differences in order for language to function. So far, this seems at least plausible but on a natural way of interpreting it, it seems to me, obviously false. The correct account is this: There is a quite distinct difference in the meaning (semantic content, significance) between "bin" and "pin", for example. In order that this semantic content can be expressed clearly, we acquire some difference between the expression of the one semantic content and the expression of the other. It does not matter at all what the difference is, it matters that there just has to be a difference. In cases where there is no difference, such as homophonic pairs of expressions, you have to rely on the context or some other features to disambiguate. It is inefficient to do this and it is a source of misunderstandings if the same word has more than one meaning. So we need some way to distinguish between the semantic content of "bin" and "pin", and we do that with a single consonant. So far, so good. The mistake is to conclude that really all there is to language is differences, and that view is profoundly mistaken. There are two quite distinct semantic contents, "bin" and "pin", and they will be conveyed differently in different languages. The important thing, however, is that there should be some way of distinguishing them. The mistake is to infer, that re-

ally, that is all there is to language, the differences, that language is just a system of differences. No, language is a system of differences that enables us to express and differentiate between *semantic contents*. It is the different *meanings* that are conveyed by the differences. The mistake is to conclude from the fact that different meanings are conveyed by syntactical differences, that all that exists are the syntactical differences. That is dead wrong. In one extreme version of this, usually called Deconstruction, we are told that language is just a free play of signifiers. That is profoundly mistaken. You cannot have the play of the signifiers if you do not know what they mean. That is to say, you cannot have the use of the syntactical expressions without an understanding of the corresponding semantic content.

### Further Limitations on a Theory of Signs

If you look at standard accounts of the functioning of language, you see that there are certain logical properties that words and sentences have, that signs in general do not have, and it might be worth our time to make these fully explicit.

First, compositionality, the power of sentences, is that you can create new meanings by recombining old meanings. Take the example I made earlier: “The horse ran around the barn” is perfectly intelligible to anybody who knows English even though you do not know what kind of horse or what kind of barn. You get a range of truth conditions just by knowing of the sentence. The meanings of the elements combine to form a new meaning and this is standardly put by saying that the meaning of the whole is a compositional function of the meaning of the elements and their method of combination in the sentence.

This ties to a second feature, which Chomsky especially emphasized, generativity. The rules of any natural human language allow recursive application of the same rule over and over so that you have a potentially infinite number of sentences. This has been disputed as a feature of all languages because Dan Everett says he has found a language in the Amazon basin, called Pirahã, that does not have recursion<sup>1</sup>. But whether or not that is true of all languages, it is certainly true of the languages that I know anything about. They allow for recursive application of the same rule over and over to generate a potentially infinite number of sentences.

A third feature is discreteness. The elements of the sentence preserve their meaning even through transformations syntactically alter their surface structure. For example, in the conjugation of the verb “go”, the past tense comes out as “went”, even though the syntactical expression “went” is different because it is an irregular verb. In fact, we understand the word “go” as occurring in the verb “went” because we see it as a discrete component that can be transferred through

1 See Dan Everett (2005): “Cultural Constraints on Grammar and Cognition in Pirahã. Another Look at the Design Features of Human Language.” In: *Current Anthropology* 46.4, pp. 621-646; Dan Everett (2008): *Don't Sleep, there are Snakes: Life and Language in the Amazonian Jungle*. New York: Pantheon.



the various permutations of the verb, such as the past tense, the subjunctive, etc. Now, let us ask of signs in general, are these features true? Can you, for example, combine different kinds of clothing to produce a new sign? I think in the case of clothing, you can, though it is a bit indefinite. I do not see how you can get an infinite generativity in the case of the semiotics of clothing because you do not get the same rule applied over and over, but at least you do get a kind of compositionality with food and clothing. You do not get generativity. But what about discreteness, do you get discreteness? I, again, doubt very much that you have discreteness with food and clothing because you can easily mush one item into another, especially with food but also with clothing, where you do not get a discrete semiotic distinction between the tie and the jacket, the pants and the shirt. But, in any case, the sense in which compositionality, generativity and discreteness apply to signs in general is much attenuated and it looks rather strongly metaphorical to say these concepts apply to such things as clothing and food. Again, the expressive power of language vastly exceeds that of signs in general. This is because language produces sentences and these sentences represent entire conditions of satisfaction, and are subject to compositionality and generativity.

I hope even this brief discussion has been able to convey that the expressive power of language vastly exceeds that of other forms of semiotics, such as drawing.

